



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

SEP 17 1976



LM089047

Mr. Julian R. Dugas
City Administrator
District of Columbia Government
Washington, D.C. 20004

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Dear Mr. Dugas:

2-22 On August 13, 1976, we wrote to you concerning the acquisition and use of two ambulances acquired under a Department of Health, Education and Welfare grant. We requested your assistance, within at least 30 days, in further reviewing this matter.

3-106 Your aide, on September 16, 1976, transmitted to me a memorandum from the Director, Department of Human Resources (DHR) to you, requesting extension to September 30, 1976, for formally responding to our letter. Because of the reporting deadline of September 21, 1976, imposed on us, we must issue the report without such response.

We believe that the matters included in our letter to you and reiterated in this report should be dealt with so that expensive idle medical equipment can be placed into service. You may wish to include your comments on our August 13, 1976, letter with your comments on this report.

We have been studying the District's motor vehicle management activities to determine how effectively and economically the city acquires and maintains its vehicles. During our study, which is not yet complete, we noted that in June 1974 DHR acquired two ambulances for use in its maternity-infant care project. They were received in April and May of 1975 respectively but, according to project staff and the mileage on the vehicles' odometers, they have been used very little. The ambulances have been parked on the D.C. General Hospital parking lot. On July 20, 1976, one ambulance's odometer showed 191 miles and the other 121 miles. On August 4, 1976, the ambulances were taken to a District maintenance facility for repairs which included new mirrors and lights. On September 2, 1976, the ambulances were parked on another D.C. General Hospital parking lot and one ambulance's odometer showed 200 miles and the other 145 miles.

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DHR officials told us the ambulances were not used between April 1975 and July 1976 because trained personnel were not available to staff the vehicles. During this period, according to a private firm's study results, reported in April 1975, the Fire Department could have used more ambulances than it had to respond to requests for services in the District. We were told that the Department was short at least four ambulances.

AMBULANCE PURCHASE

Since 1965 the maternity and infant care project has been funded by HEW grants to provide (1) comprehensive health care to eligible patients residing in the District of Columbia, (2) family planning services to any female resident of the District, and (3) health care services for District infants up to age one.

Between July 1, 1973, and June 30, 1975, DHR was authorized about \$2.7 million for the project. The grant provided \$37,000 for the acquisition of two ambulances. The ambulances were to transport maternity patients and newborn infants, who have no other means of transportation to or from the hospital.

DHR, in its justification to HEW for grant funds, stated that many of the patients do not have adequate transportation and the response from taxi firms for service was very poor, creating a long waiting period for the patients. In some cases taxis failed to respond to calls for service.

3 DHR requested the District's Department of General Services (DGS) to acquire two ambulances for the project. A DGS official told us that the acquisition of the ambulances was authorized because DHR said they were urgently needed for the project. The DGS official told us DHR determined such need but documentation to support DGS' decision was not available. C.106

A DHR official told us DHR did not know how often the vehicles would be used or how many patients the vehicles would transport. The official stated the vehicles may transport 1,000 maternity patients and their newborn infants a year to, from and among District hospitals; however, these vehicles would only be available upon request to eligible participants.

AMBULANCE USE

The ambulances were not received until about one year after purchase (April and May of 1975) because of contractor's delays. They were purchased in June 1974. Between April 1975 and July 20, 1976--15 months--the vehicles were driven a total of 312 miles. A DHR official told us the vehicles had not been used because of lack of funds to staff the vehicles. On

July 20, 1976, we observed that the patient compartments in the vehicles were not equipped, paint was peeling off one of the vehicles' fenders and some of the tires on both vehicles were partially flat.

On July 22, 1976, DHR was negotiating a contract with a local suburban ambulance firm to staff the two ambulances for 6 months, 24-hours a day. However, according to a DHR official only one ambulance will be staffed during this period and the other will be used as backup. The official said that DHR still has not determined frequency of use, or the number of patients the vehicles would handle. On September 14, 1976, the contract had not been executed.

ESTABLISHED AMBULANCE SERVICE

In August 1957, Commissioner's Order 57-1667 established the District of Columbia Emergency Ambulance Service. The Fire Department was mandated to coordinate the supervision of the Service and was authorized to enter into cost reimbursement agreements with other District departments for services rendered to such departments.

A DHR official told us that the existing ambulance service was inadequate because the ambulances were not equipped nor were the ambulances' personnel qualified to handle newborn infants and their mothers. Also, she said that the ambulances did not provide an uncontaminated environment which is vital to a newborn and its mother. However, the official said there is no scientific evidence that shows that newborn infants and their mothers cannot be transported and, when needed, provided treatment in ambulances which are used for others.

The emergency telephone number for ambulance service in the District is handled by the Fire Department and not DHR. Between July 1, 1975, and June 30, 1976, the Fire Department responded to over 75,000 calls, including about 2,200 maternity calls, or 2.9 percent of the total calls. In 87 of the maternity calls, the child was born at home and both mother and child were transported to the hospital in a Fire Department ambulance. During this period the Fire Department had 10 ambulances.

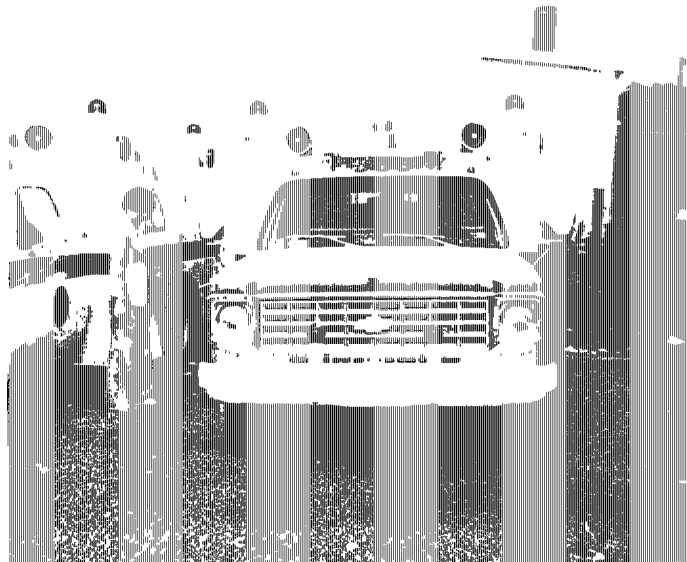
We were told by Fire Department officials that their ambulances were equipped with the necessary maternity instruments and the attendants have been trained to care for newborns and their mothers. An official stated that special equipment such as incubators would be in the ambulances if funds had been available to procure such equipment. The official also told us that department ambulances and attendants that become contaminated after a response for service are decontaminated while at the hospital. The official estimated this process requires the vehicle and staff to be out of service for about one and one-half hours.

AMBULANCE NEEDS

An April 1975 study report by a private firm of the Fire Department ambulance service showed that the probability of not being able to obtain

a Department ambulance would be 4 out of 100 requests for service. The study showed that during the peak hours of 2 p.m. and 10 p.m. the Fire Department needed 14 ambulances to meet the city's demands; however, it only had 10 at that time.

At the time the Department needed more ambulances, the new DHR ambulances costing \$37,000 remained idle. On July 20, 1976, when we inspected the ambulances, they had not been moved for some time, according to the D.C. General Hospital assistant transportation foreman.



HEW REGULATIONS

HEW grant regulations (45 CFR 74.134) state that the grantee takes title to equipment, such as the ambulances, acquired under an HEW grant at the time of acquisition. The grantee may use the equipment as long as there is a need for such equipment to accomplish the purpose of the project, whether or not the project continues to be supported by Federal funds. When there is no longer a need for the equipment to accomplish the purpose of the original project, the grantee must use the equipment in connection with other Federal awards it has received. If the equipment is not needed for any federally financed activities the grantee can retain it for its own use, but must make fair compensation for the Federal share of the equipment. However, if the equipment is no longer needed, the grantee (DHR) must request disposition instructions from HEW.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal grant funds were used to acquire two ambulances which remained idle for about 17 months. The need for the ambulances for the grant project, therefore, is questionable. According to a private firm's study report of the Fire Department ambulance service and District officials, there is an ambulance shortage in the city. DHR could make arrangements with HEW to allow the Fire Department to use the two ambulances purchased with grant funds to help meet the District's stated ambulance need.

We recommend that DHR:

1. Evaluate and document the need for the two ambulances in the grant project and, if found to be unneeded in that project arrange for their use in another program or, if no use can be found, ask HEW for disposition instructions.
2. If the ambulances are found to be necessary for the grant project and funds are not available to staff the ambulances, DHR should explore with HEW available alternatives for using the ambulances to accomplish the grant project purposes.
3. DHR should formally advise HEW of the non-use of the ambulances over a 17-month period, so that HEW can determine the appropriate corrective action.

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Copies of this report are being sent to the Mayor, City Council, Office of Budget and Management Systems, the Department of Human Resources, the Department of General Services, the Fire Department, the District of Columbia Auditor, and the Office of Municipal Audit and Inspection.

Please let us know within 30 days the actions taken. If you have any questions, please call me on extension 3123 or 3124.

Sincerely yours;

Frank Medico
Frank Medico
Assistant Director